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ABSTRACT

A study examined perceptions of the appropriateness of nonverbal behaviors in dyadic interactions. A questionnaire was constructed containing descriptions of nine touching, posture, and personal space behaviors likely to occur in normal dyadic interactions, such as entering a room without knocking, leaning back and putting one's feet on a desk, addressing another by first name, stepping aside in a hallway to let another pass, failing to laugh at another's joke, and interrupting someone during a conversation. For each type of behavior listed, four different contexts were constructed. The first two described a male/female dyad with the behavior performed by the male, then the female. The other two were high status/low status dyads, with the behavior performed by the high status person, then by the low status person. The subjects, 298 college students, were asked to rate the appropriateness of the behaviors described. The results indicated that touching, posture, and personal space behaviors were considered more appropriate for high status persons than for low status persons, while few differences were found between the sexes. Putting one's feet on the desk and stepping aside in the hallway were considered more appropriate for males, and failing to laugh at a joke and gesturing for another to come around to her side of the desk were considered more appropriate for females. (HTH)

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# A Comparison of the Effects of Sex and Status on the Perceived Appropriateness of Nonverbal Behaviors

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# A Comparison of the Effects of Sex and Status on the Perceived Appropriateness of Nonverbal Behaviors


## Abstract

This study examines perceptions of the appropriateness of nonverbal behaviors in dyadic interactions. Subjects were given descriptions of certain nonverbal behaviors performed in either mixed-sex or mixed-status dyads and asked to rate the appropriateness of each. Eight different types of nonverbal behaviors were examined. Results indicate that in all but one area, sex and/or status did have a significant influence on perceptions of the appropriateness of these behaviors.


As important as the verbal code of human communication may be, nonverbal behaviors also play a large role in the communication process. Much of the significance of a message may depend on factors as diverse as facial expression, vocal cues, gestures, eye contact, and even the mode of dress of the communicator. Researchers have indicated that the majority of the social meaning of a message may be conveyed nonverbally,[1] and that when the verbal and nonverbal components of a message contradict, the nonverbal is more credible,[2] and that feelings and emotions are more accurately expressed nonverbally.[3] That nonverbal behaviors have recently been studied extensively should then come as no surprise.

One topic that has received some attention recently is the examination of sex differences with regard to nonverbal behaviors. Whether or not males and females perform dissimilar nonverbal behaviors and the causes of such differences have been the subject of much research.[4] The perceived appropriateness of certain nonverbal behaviors, particularly with regard to sex differences has not been studied so intensively, however.

Another topic examined by many researchers is that of status

differences with respect to nonverbal behaviors. Many attempts have been made to examine the differences in nonverbal behaviors between individuals of high status and those of lower status.[5] Receiving less attention has been the examination of the perceived appropriateness of such behaviors.

The extent to which an individual perceives another's behaviors as being appropriate in certain situations is an important factor in the communication process and may affect judgments, subsequent communication, and relationship development. Previous research does exist which examines differences in perceptions between male and female speech.[6] These studies tend to reveal the existence of sex-based differences with regard to perceptions of language style. The purpose of the present study is to examine perceptions of the appropriateness of certain nonverbal behaviors in dyadic interactions. Nonverbal behaviors in mixed-sex and mixed-status interactions will be examined. Since Henley notes that, with regard to nonverbal behavior, the workings of sex and status are often confounded,[7] the present study attempts to look at these variables independently. The areas of nonverbal behavior to be examined include: touch, posture, personal space, gestures, laughter, terms of address, the use of time, and interruptions. These areas were chosen because sex differences and/or status differences were revealed through previous research, to be discussed below.

Touch

Haptics, or the study of touch, has indicated that this form of behavior plays an important role in human relationships. Burgoon and Saine note that touch has a social value, biological value, psychological

value, as well as a communication value.[8] The need for touch extends from earliest infancy into adulthood. Indeed, Montagu states that inadequate tactile experience will result in an inability to relate to other individuals in many ways.[9]

Jourard found females to be considerably more accessible to touch than males.[10] A replication of this study a decade later by Rosenfeld,et al., found very similar results, and additionally found an increase in the amount of touching between opposite-sex friends.[11]

The relationship between touching and status is based primarily on anecdotal evidence and observations of behavior in artificial contexts, such as movies and plays. This evidence suggests that touching is initiated by a higher-status individual who also determines what forms of touching are acceptable. Henley reports an observational study of touching in public to examine the relationship between status and touching. However, the status variable in her study is confounded with sex since she notes that she assumed the male sex to be of higher status than female.[12]

Posture

Scheflen described many instances in which status is related to posture or bodily movements.[13] Such positions as leaning back in a chair to speak, putting the palms on the back of the head or neck are associated with superiority. Other movements such as placing the hands on the hips may be related to attempts to show dominance.[14] Spiegel and Machotka report on a study in which subjects were asked to examine a set of drawn figures and then rate the figures in the drawings on a number of dimensions, including superiority. Subjects rated certain postures as being highly related to dominance, for example, standing with hands on hips or

standing and gesturing with the hands.[15]

Birdwhistell speaks of postural forms displayed mainly by one sex or the other.[16] Examples include the intrafemoral angle, the way in which an individual walks, and the angle between the arms and the torso. Sex differences have also been observed in head movements, with females more often cocking the head to one side, while males tend more often to tilt their heads forward.[17] Henley cites numerous postural differences which occur between males and females.[18]

Personal Space

Personal space refers to an area surrounding each individual, which may expand or contract according to the situation. It differs from the concept of territoriality in that personal space is portable, i.e., it travels with the individual. Willis found that speakers stood closer to women than to men.[19] Knapp reports on other studies which found that mixed-sex dyads interact more closely than female dyads which in turn interact at closer distances than male dyads.[20] Males have also been found to have larger amounts of personal space than do females.[21]

Status differences have also been observed with regard to personal space. Lott and Sommer found that subjects tended to sit closer to someone of equal status than to either a lower-status or higher-status individual.[22] Mehrabian also found a relationship between status and personal space, with those higher in status commanding more personal space.[23] Henley suggests that not only do individuals higher in status have larger amounts of personal space, but can also more easily invade the personal space of those lower in status. Low-status individuals cannot usually invade the space of those higher in status without violating social norms, however.[24]

Gestures

While gestures are closely related to the works on posture discussed earlier, and are typically classified together with posture under the heading of kinesics, the present study considers the two topics separately. Gestures are considered here as movements involving hands or arms while posture involves larger bodily movements such as torso movements. Knapp reports that individuals exhibit greater relaxation of the hands when addressing lower-status individuals.[25] Burgoon and Saine report that high-status individuals have more gestures directed toward them, determine the kind and amount of gestures used by others, and display more relaxation through their gestures than do persons of lower status.[26]

Sex differences have also been observed with regard to gestures. Henley summarizes many of these differences, including such behaviors as arm movements and "preening" gestures.[27] Scheflen also notes many gestural differences between males and females.[28]

Laughter

Very little empirical research has examined laughter with regard to either sex or status differences. The variable of laughter is included in the present study primarily for exploratory purposes. Coser conducted an observational study of laughter among co-workers. She found that more intentional jokes were made by higher status workers than by those of lower status. Also of interest was the fact that most of these jokes were directed toward another co-worker, always toward a co-worker of lower status.[29] Henley presents anecdotal evidence that laughter may be a behavior associated with subordinate status, with such individuals being constrained by their status to laugh at the jokes made by those of higher status.[30]

Terms of Address

Strictly speaking, terms of address are verbal, not nonverbal, behavior. However, as will be discussed below, there may be subtle aspects of this form of behavior which may make it more than strictly a verbal phenomenon. That is, terms of address may almost be classified as what Mahl and Schulze refer to as "extralinguistic phenomena."[31] Brown and Ford state that forms of address can serve as a "status marker."[32] Status differences are also indicated by nonreciprocal forms of address. That is, a high status individual may address a lower status person by first name, while the lower status person generally uses a title and last name. Slobin, Miller and Porter found evidence of this pattern of nonreciprocity.[33] In addition, the right to initiate a change to a more intimate term of address is usually reserved for high-status individuals. This nonreciprocity is also seen in other nonverbal behaviors such as invasions of personal space, touching, the degree of relaxation in posture, and what Duncan[34] refers to as "turn-taking" in conversations. So, while the term of address is a verbal behavior, because of the connotations connected with it, it is included here for exploratory purposes.

Sex differences have also been reported with regard to terms of address. Eakins and Eakins report that women are generally addressed in more familiar terms than men and more often addressed by first names.[35]

Interruptions

Knapp describes vocal cues which are important to the process of "managing" interactions and are associated with the rules of "turn-taking" in interactions.[36] Interruptions may be thought of as the violation of these "turn-taking" rules or the ignoring of the associated vocal cues.

Eakins and Eakins report that interruptions are associated with

status, with individuals highest in status interrupting others most often.[37] Zimmerman and West also found sex differences in this area, reporting that males tend to interrupt others more than females.[38] This finding was based on unobtrusive tape recordings of actual conversations in natural settings. Interruptions by males were frequently followed by long silences on the part of the female interactant. However, Rogers and Jones found no differences in interruption behaviors of males and females in same-sex dyads.[39]

Time

Chronemics, or the study of how we perceive and use time, is an extremely interesting field of study. Burgoon and Saine detail our culture's obsession with time and discuss the concept of time at three different perceptual levels: psychological, biological, and cultural.[40] Schwartz discusses the distribution of time in social systems.[41] Waiting for another, according to Schwartz, produces social and personal costs. The distribution of these costs coincides with the distribution of power. That is, lower status persons spend more time waiting for others and therefore incur greater costs. In fact, it is possible to enhance one's status by causing another to wait. Henley hypothesizes the existence of certain zones of time similar to zones of personal space.[42] Thus, we may perceive someone who takes up too much of our time as having violated some temporal zone, analogous to having invaded our personal space. Henley also presents anecdotal evidence that females spend more time waiting and that female's time is considered to be less important than a male's.

In summary, previous research has found sex and/or status differences associated with each of the previously mentioned areas of nonverbal behavior. The present study seeks to examine differences in the perceived

appropriateness of these behaviors when they are performed in dyadic interactions. Specifically, this study attempts to determine if the appropriateness of these nonverbal behaviors is perceived differentially depending upon the sex of the interactant in mixed-sex dyads or on the status of the interactant in mixed-status dyads.

## Method

Subjects were 309 students enrolled at a Southern university. Eleven subjects provided incomplete information and data from these were discarded, leaving a sample of 298. Of these, 108 were male and 190 female. Subjects ranged in age from seventeen to thirty-six with a mean age of twenty.

A questionnaire was constructed containing descriptions of nonverbal behaviors performed in dyadic interactions. Behaviors were chosen that could conceivably occur on a frequent basis in normal interactions. The behaviors listed were:

-giving another a pat on the back

-entering another's office without knocking

-leaning back in one's chair and putting one's feet on a desk

-gesturing to another to come to the other side of a desk to look at a paper

-addressing another by first name

-stepping to one side in a hallway, allowing another to go past

-failing to laugh at a joke told by another

-keeping another waiting 45 minutes for an appointment

-interrupting another during a conversation

For each type of behavior listed, four different descriptions of the context in which the behavior occurred were constructed. The first described a male/female dyad with the behavior being performed by the male. The

second described a male/female dyad with the female performing the behavior. The third described a high status/low status dyad with the high status person performing the behavior. The fourth described a high status/low status dyad with the behavior performed by the low status person. The mixed-sex dyads were identified by specific masculine and feminine first names, with no mention of status. The mixed-status dyads were identified by using status terms, with no mention of sex. Three pairs of status terms were used: student/professor, doctor/patient, file clerk in a large corporation/president of the corporation. These different descriptions make it possible to examine sex and status independently in an effort to avoid the problem of confounding these two variables, which was mentioned previously.

Four different forms of the questionnaire were then developed, each containing one of the four different descriptions of dyadic context for each nonverbal behavior. The four descriptions of each behavior were counterbalanced across forms of the questionnaire, such that each form contained equal numbers of each type of description. The four forms of the questionnaire were distributed randomly to subjects, with each subject completing only one form. In this manner, responses to each of the different descriptions could be made without being biased by a previous response to another description of the same behavior.

Following each item on the questionnaire, subjects were asked to rate the appropriateness of the behavior described. Ratings were made using a 7-point scale, anchored at each point, with 1 indicating "very appropriate" and 7 indicating "very inappropriate." Finally, subjects were asked to supply demographic information including sex, age and classification.

## Results

Means were obtained for each item on each form of the questionnaire. A t-test was then used to compare the mean ratings of appropriateness for behaviors performed by males and females. Similarly, ratings of behaviors performed by high-status and low-status persons were also compared. Table 1 shows the comparisons of mean ratings of appropriateness for those behaviors performed in mixed-status dyads. Table 2 shows the comparisons of mean ratings of appropriateness for the same behaviors performed in mixed-sex dyads.

A significant difference between ratings of appropriateness for touching in mixed-status dyads is shown in Table 1. Subjects felt that it was less appropriate for a low-status person to give a pat on the back to a high-status person than for a high-status person to perform this behavior ($t=4.39$, $p<.001$). Table 2 shows no significant difference attributable to the sex of the individual performing this same behavior.

With regard to posture, significant differences were found in connection with both sex and status. Subjects felt that it was much more appropriate for a high-status person to lean back in his chair and prop his feet on a desk than for a low-status to do so ($t=4.38$, $p<.001$). Subjects also indicated that, in a mixed-sex dyad, it was more appropriate for a male to perform this behavior than a female ($t=2.18$, $p<.05$).

Subjects also indicated that it was much more appropriate for a high-status individual to address a low-status person by first name than for a low-status individual to use this term of address ($t=12.48$, $p<.001$). Yet, no significant differences were found in mixed-sex dyads.

No significant differences were found with regard to either sex or status in connection with the perceived appropriateness of interruptions. Subject ratings were relatively high for all descriptions of this behavior,

regardless of who interrupted whom, indicating that this type of behavior is viewed as somewhat inappropriate in all contexts.

Failing to laugh at a joke told by another was perceived as more appropriate for females than for males ($t=2.43$, $p<.05$). However, mean ratings of the appropriateness of this behavior in mixed-status dyads were not significantly different.

Subjects indicated that it was more appropriate for a high-status person to intrude on the space of lower-status persons than for the lower-status person to do so. Specifically, entering another's office without knocking was seen as more appropriate behavior for a high-status person ($t=6.01$, $p<.001$). However, in mixed-sex dyads, no significant differences were seen in the ratings of appropriateness of this behavior.

However, with regard to another item associated with personal space, sex differences were found to exist. This item describes the behavior of stepping to one side in a hallway. allowing another to go past, thereby yielding space to the other. Subjects indicated that it was much more appropriate for a male to move out of a female's way that for a female to move ($t=7.49$, $p<.001$). Examining this same behavior in a mixed-status dyad, no significant differences were found.

Subjects also felt that it was more appropriate for a high-status person to keep a lower-status person waiting for an appointment than for the lower-status person to keep the high-status person waiting ($t=2.30$, $p<.05$). No significant differences were found with regard to sex, however. It was perceived as inappropriate for both males and

females to keep the other waiting.

Perceptions of appropriateness with regard to gestures produced significant differences between ratings of appropriateness for both sex and status. This item describes a dyad in which one person makes a gesture indicating that he/she wants the other to come to the other side of a desk to look at a paper. Subjects felt that it was more appropriate for a female to use this gesture in a mixed-sex dyad than for a male ($t=1.98$, $p<.05$). Subjects also indicated that, in mixed-status dyads, it was more appropriate for the high-status person to use this gesture ($t=4.48$, $p<.001$).

## Discussion

This study examined perceptions of the appropriateness of certain nonverbal behaviors in dyadic interactions. One of the most important aspects of the design of this study is that an attempt was made to look at sex and status independently. The problems that exist when these two variables are confounded are discussed by Henley.[43]

While previous research has examined the extent to which certain behaviors are performed by males and females or by individuals differing in status, this study examined the extent to which these behaviors are perceived by others as being appropriate. While these are two distinctly different lines of inquiry, an inspection of the similarities and differences between these two may be profitable. For example, the findings regarding touch may partially help to provide a clearer understanding of this behavior with regard to status. A study by Henley was previously cited in which sex and status were confounded. The present findings indicate a significant difference in perceived appropriateness attributable to the status of the toucher but no significant differences

due to sex. Similarly, significant differences due to status were found in the areas of posture, terms of address, intrusion of personal space, time, and gestures. However, sex differences were observed only in the areas of personal space, gestures, laughter, and posture and these differences tended to be smaller that the observed differences in connection with status.

Henley seems to imply that if differences in nonverbal behaviors are observed between individuals differing in status and similar differences observed between males and females, then one may presume that there also exists a status difference between the sexes, with males as higher in status.[44] She also implies that, with regard to certain nonverbal behaviors, if status differences are observed one may also expect to find sex differences as well. Arguments such as these only serve to further confound these variables.

While the present study cannot provide direct evidence to refute these arguments, it does indicate that there are differences between the way in which one perceives a behavior performed in a mixed-sex dyad and the perception of that same behavior performed in a mixed-status dyad. That is, when sex and status are viewed independently, one generally does not find that perceptions between the two are in agreement. In only one area, that of posture, did subjects perceive that a behavior was more appropriate for a high-status individual and also rate that behavior as more appropriate for males. Differences between ratings for status and sex may have been due to differences in explicit rule knowledge or to a lack of willingness to make discriminating judgments based on sex.

The findings of this study may be applied to interpersonal communication, particularly with regard to initial encounters. Kleinke details the

importance of first impressions and their effect on subsequent communication.[45] A judgment about the appropriateness of another's behavior may affect not only subsequent communication but the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships as well. Such a judgment may also cause subsequent changes in the performance of a behavior. For example, if a behavior is performed more by males than females and yet is consistently viewed by others as being inappropriate, this behavior may subsequently not be performed as often or as readily in light of such judgments of inappropriateness. Issues such as these may be examined further in future research.

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TABLE 1

Mean Ratings of Appropriateness of Behaviors Performed by High Status (HS) and Low Status (LS) Persons

| Behaviors | Performed by | $\bar{X}$ | SD | t |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Touching another | HS | 2.44 | 1.74 | |
| | LS | 3.81 | 2.05 | 4.38*** |
| Lean back in chair-relaxed posture | HS | 5.27 | 1.62 | |
| | LS | 6.36 | 1.44 | 4.38*** |
| Address another by first name | HS | 2.71 | 1.80 | |
| | LS | 5.98 | 1.37 | 12.48*** |
| Interrupting another | HS | 5.80 | 1.32 | |
| | LS | 5.93 | 1.42 | .57 |
| Failure to laugh at another's joke | HS | 4.39 | 1.78 | |
| | LS | 3.88 | 1.93 | 1.68 |
| Intrusion of another's personal space | HS | 4.81 | 1.95 | |
| | LS | 6.40 | 1.13 | 6.01*** |
| Keeping another waiting | HS | 5.79 | 1.50 | |
| | LS | 6.32 | 1.34 | 2.30* |
| Gesture made to another | HS | 2.75 | 1.60 | |
| | LS | 4.03 | 1.84 | 4.48*** |
| Moving out of another's way-yielding space | HS | 2.81 | 1.69 | |
| | LS | 2.52 | 1.76 | 1.01 |

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

TABLE 2

Mean Ratings of Appropriateness of Behaviors Performed by Males (M) and Females (F)

| Behavior | Performed by | $\bar{X}$ | SD | t |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Touching another | M | 2.06 | 1.31 | |
| | F | 1.98 | 1.39 | .37 |
| Lean back in chair-relaxed posture | M | 4.65 | 1.62 | |
| | F | 5.31 | 2.04 | 2.18* |
| Address another by first name | M | 2.12 | 1.63 | |
| | F | 1.98 | 1.52 | .53 |
| Interrupting another | M | 5.81 | 1.37 | |
| | F | 5.86 | 1.17 | .28 |
| Failure to laugh at another's joke | M | 4.46 | 1.76 | |
| | F | 3.72 | 1.92 | 2.43* |
| Intrusion of another's personal space | M | 5.55 | 1.67 | |
| | F | 5.51 | 1.46 | .15 |
| Keeping another waiting | M | 6.29 | 1.34 | |
| | F | 6.28 | 1.40 | .03 |
| Gesture made to another | M | 3.28 | 1.90 | |
| | F | 2.68 | 1.79 | 1.98* |
| Moving out of another's way-yielding space | M | 1.89 | 1.77 | |
| | F | 4.21 | 2.01 | 7.49*** |

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$